

Uncle Rufus imprinted himself on my life some 60 years ago on the morning after my eighth birthday. Rufus was my late grandfather's brother and my mother's only remaining family. It was my fourth summer vacation at his farm and up until that day, he barely acknowledged my existence, speaking of me to my mother, but never directly to me. It was like I wasn't there. So when he invited me to ride lookout on his monthly trip to the farmer's market, I was thrilled and off the front porch before he finished asking, running for the old Ford flatbed parked in the barn.

As our truck lumbered down the one-lane dirt road, trucks from other farms pulled in behind us. Uncle Rufus explained that because we were "leadin' the herd," it would be my job to "keep an eye out" for potholes. "Can't be holdin' up the others. Not neighborly." He motioned back over his shoulder at the boxes of fresh produce he'd loaded the night before. "Can't afford ta be bruisin' them tomaters either."

About a mile from town, a lone calf ambling behind its mother along a pasture fence got me wondering why Uncle Rufus had no cows on his farm. I turned to ask just as he slammed on the brake. Caught by surprise, I slid off the seat to the sounds of crates banging into the cab behind me. A cloud of dust blew in the open driver's door as the truck behind us skidded to a stop. Had we hit a pothole? Had I failed at my first job?

When I pulled myself back up on the seat, Uncle Rufus was already outside, bent down in front of the truck. My fear that the truck was damaged evaporated when he stood up clutching a fry pan-sized turtle between both hands. I watched him examine the stump that once was its back leg, then carry the turtle to the other side of the road where he gently placed it in the grass.

As he got back in the truck, he turned to me, apparently feeling a need to explain the abrupt stop. "All livin' things got a right to life, but some need a helpin' hand now and then. Simple as that."

The words stuck to my mind like a burr sticks to pant cuffs. Suddenly I realized why there were no cows, chickens or pigs on Uncle Rufus's farm. He probably couldn't bring himself to slaughter an animal, even for food. I decided then and there that Uncle Rufus possessed something I lacked. What that something was eluded me at the time. I thought it was kindness, but in retrospect it was the simple clarity with which he viewed himself in relation to the World and all things living, a seed of humility that took root deep within me.

His impact on my judgment and behavior continues to surprise and occasionally delight me. Like Uncle Rufus, I have developed a nose for simple truths that come from people who are, as he used to put it, "in the stew, not stirrin' and seasonin' it." He believed there were two kinds of people on Earth:

those who connect the dots and those who list them. “Them that connect the dots are few and far between,” he’d say. “Listin’ them is easy.”

Reflecting back, I marvel at how impressed young children can be, not by what adults say, but by the simplest of things they do and dismiss as matter-of-fact. From Uncle Rufus I discovered that I was one of those people who connect the dots, and from him I learned that to get at truth, you have to dig beneath the surface to find the right dots to connect.

Now with hindsight of nearly 70 years, I still marvel at the invisible tools Uncle Rufus gave me to navigate my way through life: a compass outside, a gyroscope within. And every time I see or hear about someone, some unsung hero, doing “the right thing” for a purpose often at odds with what self-interest would dictate, Uncle Rufus comes alive in my mind and my heart. It’s as “simple as that.”